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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [YM](#) [DEMOCRATIC REFORM](#) [DOMESTIC POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: YEMEN,S ELECTION: CITIZENS BET ON DEMOCRACY

1. (U) Summary: The April 27 parliamentary election demonstrated significant progress in Yemen's democratic path despite some flaws. Obvious enthusiasm and interest by voters in the campaign, including more than 75% turnout on election day, indicate a healthy appetite for democracy in Yemen. The preliminary results contain little change, with the ruling party maintaining a wide majority of more than 70% of the seats. The Islah party, however, made surprising gains in the urban city of Sanaa. In a region with a noted lack of healthy democratic trends, this exercise in democracy represents an important example. End Summary.

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Progress on the Road to Democracy  
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2. (U) Yemen's third parliamentary election since unification represents another milestone in movement towards full democracy despite flaws in its election and political processes, as noted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and other political observers (see paragraph 10 below). The campaign period saw a palpable sense of enthusiasm and participation, culminating in a huge turnout of 76% of registered voters on election day. With a 40% increase in women registered to vote over the last registration, massive numbers of women exercised their right to freely choose their representatives. As NDI reports, citizens' "deepening sense of democratic entitlement is an important indication of Yemen's progress. . ."

3. (U) President Saleh played a constructive and important role in encouraging the democratic process. His comments at several press conferences before and during the election made several key points that were important for the peaceful nature of election day and for setting the tone of democratic rights. He said on April 27, "we have to accept defeat or victory with a democratic spirit." Election day was relatively peaceful compared to past elections, owing in part to the prominence placed on a "weapons free day." He also made a comparison to Iraq, saying that he did not want "99.9%" of the vote for the ruling party, and noted that a strong democratic showing would ensure that Yemen was safe from actions similar to what happened in Iraq.

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Results Show Little Change;  
Islah Gains in Urban Areas  
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4. (U) The Supreme Commission for Elections and Referenda (SCER) announced official results on April 30, under the 72-hour deadline mandated by election law. Out of 301 constituencies, final results are known in 280 while 21 remain under dispute. The ruling General People's Congress (GPC) garnered an overwhelming majority with 214 seats so far, more than 70%. The opposition Islah party gained 40 seats (13%), the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) 7 seats (2%), and independents and smaller parties 19 seats. One woman of the 11 female candidates won, marking a decrease from the last parliament, which had two women.

5. (U) The SCER did not give specific details about the problems holding up the disputed constituencies but noted that some might require by-elections. Observers note that these constituencies face problems such as counting commissioners who refuse to complete the count and stolen ballot boxes.

6. (U) Many observers were surprised that the opposition parties, particularly Islah, did not do better in the election. During the campaign, it appeared that the opposition parties would increase their seats, particularly Islah. However, only in Sanaa city did Islah make noticeable gains, increasing their number from one to over half of the constituencies. This result in a major urban area surprised many because Islah's strongholds tend to be in traditional tribal areas. Some observers were shocked as well that the Islah won in what is called the "unity constituency," where President Saleh votes and where his son last held the seat. While difficult to confirm, some observers believe that fraud and political intimidation did effect the outcome of the election in GPC's favor in some constituencies outside of Sanaa.

7. (U) Political observers believe that Islah's gains in

Sanaa were a result of dissatisfaction with the government, Islah's message of change resonating with voters, a well-organized campaign and poor GPC candidate selection.

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Campaign Issues  
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18. (U) "Bread and butter" issues dominated the election, with economic and law and order issues prevalent. Anti-corruption and anti-government messages were popular among opposition parties. Although observers had thought that the war in Iraq and ongoing U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation would become big issues, the fall of Baghdad three weeks before election day largely diminished the issue. As one Yemeni observer said, "when people are hungry, they don't care about foreign policy."

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Comment  
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19. (U) While far from perfect, these elections demonstrated an entrenchment of political rights by Yemeni citizens that sets an example for future democratic trends in the region. The flaws in the process must be vigorously addressed before the next election in 2006, with the help of the international community, to avoid backsliding in Yemen's democratic progress.

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NDI Report: Significant Step Forward Despite Flaws  
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10. (U) As NDI described in its preliminary statement on April 29, both positive and negative developments characterized the elections. The full report, with specific examples and anecdotal evidence, was sent to NEA/ARP and is also available at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org). The positive developments include:

- a relatively peaceful election, with fewer injuries and deaths due to violent clashes than in previous elections;
- full participation by all major political parties allowing for increased competition and a further entrenchment of the multi-party system;
- a well-administered and organized balloting process on election day;
- significant professional improvements by the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referenda (SCER);
- close and constructive cooperation between international actors, including NDI, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the UN Development Program (UNDP), and the SCER, resulting in significant administrative and political improvements.

Despite many positive developments, significant flaws remain that must be addressed vigorously in future election processes, including:

- evidence of election law violations, primarily but not exclusively by the GPC, including political intimidation, underage voting, inappropriate behavior by security forces and vote buying on election day;
- obstruction by counting commissioners that has caused the results of more than 20 constituencies to go unannounced 72 hours after the end of voting, calling into question the credibility of results in these areas.

For example,  
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